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Gail Jones

**Five Meditations on a Moonlit Night
(I. M. Veronica Brady)**

(I) Footprints and Bereavement

In 1969 human beings stamped their footprints on the surface of the moon. They did not tread lightly, but bounded boldly and emphatically, impressing the soft lunar dust with their heavy ridged boots. The photographer Michael Light, who is responsible for collecting hundreds of photographs taken on the moons' surface, says that what is remarkable about these traces is that they will not fade or diminish. Because the moon has no wind, no rain and no forms of erosion, the astronomical footprints will exist for a hundred million years.

Why is this idea disquieting?

I want to use this small detail – this notion of human figuration (photography, artworks) and human disfiguration (the marking of the face of the moon, the leaving of traces) to meditate on the dialectic between art and the natural world. And I want to ask - and this is a very personal question – why it seems to me that these footprints, these trans-historical footprints, are somehow associated with grief or bereavement.

The knowledge of ineradicable footprints is paradigmatic of many things: the imperial gestures by which we try to claim the earth and the sky, the persisting contest between tradition and modernity, the scientific aspiration to capture the natural as a material resource. I think of televisual images of men in cumbersome suits, each looking awkward, cartoonish, absurdly misplaced, each bobbing and heaving in a place that had hitherto been mysterious. The astronauts' faces are obscured by reflecting glass panels, so they appear as anonymous, as representative human shapes. Yet their movements and actions seem to signify disparagement: there is no sense that they have entered a place of mystery or strangeness: the moon is a golf course, it is a mine, it is a workplace, it is a playground; it is, above all, a television event. The flag they leave behind them is an artificial and almost ludicrous token of conquest.

Implicit here is the violation of the aesthetic and symbolic autonomy of the moon, and beyond that, an example of the subordination of mystery to instrumentality. We have gazed at the moon for millennia and its enchantment was in part its utter remoteness. We love what evades our grasp; we admire radical otherness, we adore the sublimity of natural phenomena that imply a completely separate scale of being. While art strives to register our forms of interconnection and correspondence, it also seeks, I think, to affirm this separateness – that humanity is not, after all, the measure of all things, but that we exist in local, planetary and cosmic contexts that require our humility and our awe. Something in the technical markings left on the moon offend this principle, this link between correspondence and separation. And since we often speak of the face of the moon, these everlasting marks can be read as a kind of defacement, as a persistent scarring.

Grief is the emotional registration of loss. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the natural world carries loss, just as it carries renewal and redemption. This loss takes the shape of a human footprint.

(II) The Gift and Forgetfulness

What is nature? Nature is the gift. Let us imagine a new economy. In conventional terms, economies are ways of deciding and locating value: these are systems in which value is transferred, traded, accumulated and so on. However there is also, of course, the economy of the gift. In this symbolic model there is a circuit of exchange and a profound sense of value, but the ethic is of generosity, not possession or profit, and the value is incalculable. Oceans, forest, desert, sky: these are gifts. We receive them but we do not possess them: they are the generosity of Being itself. Art has a function to reinstate an understanding of the gift economy, because it recognises metaphysical, not just physical forms of value, and because in our representations, our music, poetry, craft work, photographs, we attempt to honour the gift by increasing its presence in essentially metaphoric forms. Perhaps, too, we could say that the finest artworks recover in us the experience of gratitude. When I think about the night-sky, and about the footprinted moon, I am conscious that the gift of night is the gift of wonderment. Who among us has not wondered at the loveliness of stars or the dark glossy sweep of the Milky Way?

For writers the night offers an alternative poetics. Night is mythic, it is a space of fantasy, meditation, desire, romance, yearning – the promissory state, that is to say, of many stories – but it is also redolent of a whole constellation of gifted perceptions: luminosity, tranquility, suspension, infinity.

Let me now offer a metaphor for our forgetting of the gift. Since the moon takes 27.3 days to go once around the earth, and 27.3 days to spin on its axis, it always keeps the same face turned in our earthly direction. Before 1959, when the Russians sent the third Lunik rocket around the moon, no one had seen its enigmatic far side. The dark face of the moon. The inscrutable face. However the moon is unstable as well as regular in its movement. It wobbles and oscillates – these minor shifts in space are called librations. Because the moon librates, selenographers have seen fifty-nine per cent of its surface, even though no more than fifty per cent is visible at any one time. So there is always a margin between the seen and the unseen, and only forty one per cent of the moon is permanently hidden.

This anomaly appeals to me because it reminds us that behind every shiny visibility lies its dark elaboration, and that our scientific knowledge can never quite encompass the distance between seeing and knowing. It reminds us that the entirety of things is always hidden. The philosophy of black ink painting, of Japanese Sumi-e, suggests that art must assume only sixty per cent visibility of whatever it paints. The missing forty per cent, in both creation and reception, is the act of aesthetic experience.

Remembering the unseen face, like remembering the economy of the gift, is also the work of art.

(III) Approximations

This section takes as its starting point a quote from the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famous essay on nature. He wrote: "We live in a system of approximations. Our music, our poetry, our language itself, are not satisfactions, but suggestions" (Emerson 2009: 44)¹.

As the Sumi-e wisdom implies, art is not an act of completion or replication; in Emerson's terms it is like a *suggestion*.

Why might this idea be important? The idea, of approximation instills in us the humility of any attempt at meaning. Since our meanings are provisional and not absolute, art too is the expression of our honourable contingency and incompleteness. No artist would claim perfection: this is truly inhuman. However it is perhaps another aspect of our forgetfulness that we do not cherish the idea of approximation, even the idea of failure, as we should.

Error and illusion are central to art. Think, by way of analogy, of the illusion of the moon's size. When it is situated low down, near the horizon, it appears quite large, and it seems to shrink, often remarkably, as it appears to ascend. Everyone has seen it: the big fat moon shining like a spoon, and the high small dot, remote and reduced. These moons are, of course, exactly the same size; even Ptolemy, one of the earliest astronomers, knew this to be so. But scientific knowledge does not diminish our human apprehension or pleasure of illusion; nor does it require us to rescale the moon to its actual consistency. Instead, art is our form of negotiation between the real and the visionary, and a fat moon in a poem is not untrue. Van Gogh's sky is not untrue. A piece of music, like Holst's *Planets Suite*, is not untrue. In fact approximation, we could say, is the quality of celebration in art.

When we configure or transfigure in musical notes, or paint, or clay, or in frail written words, we do not *figure out* meaning. We figure suggestions. We figure illusions. And our responsibility is not to *disfigure*, or dishonour. Astronomers tell us that the world came into existence, in a big bang, about 15 billion years ago. Stars, planets, entire whirling galaxies, all swept into being. The universe is expanding, getting thinner and thinner, and apparently is 90 to 99 per cent composed (depending on estimates) of what has been called 'missing' or 'dark' matter, an inexplicable form of mass which includes, among other things, the black hole remnants of dead stars. In this context human existence is incredibly tiny, but also magnificently implausible, and the idea that a kind of darkness is the main substance of the universe is almost too strange for one person to consider. I have no particular knowledge of science – but what I want to affirm is the patterning impulse that such a discrepancy inspires, and I want to think about how we aestheticize darkness. Here is a piece of writing from one of my favourite authors, John Berger:

We are both storytellers. Lying on our backs, we look up at the night sky. This is where stories began, under the aegis of that multitude of stars which at night filch certitudes and sometimes return them as faith. Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events

¹ R. W. Emerson [1836] 2009. *Nature and Other Essays*. Mineola-New York: Dover Publications.

threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky (2005: 8)².

What moves me about this paragraph is its affirmation of the wish to place patterns over the darkness, to praise in the face of emptiness, and to trade certitude for faith. Stories change nothing in our relation to eternity, but the human capacity to design is a loving return of the gift.

(IV) The Man in the Moon

With some hesitancy I wish now to introduce my own fiction.

I spent my childhood in several areas in rural Western Australia, in a remote region by the ocean in the far north west, in the goldmining district of the desert in the centre, and in dairy farming land near the south west coast. I have inhabited, therefore, a series of landscapes, each with its own claims of beauty and specialness. Child-knowing keeps safe images and experiences of place in highly particular ways, and I believe that the landscapes of childhood have particular relevance to artistry. The heart has many chambers, one might say, to house all it has lived in.

Of the desert I remember not just terrestrial enlargements, endless horizons and exceptional distances, but also the immensity and scope of the night-time sky. One of my stories, called "The Man in the Moon" (1997)³ attempts to understand the metaphor of the moon as a face. The story is about mourning; a young woman remembers her father and her mother, and connects her father's obsession with drawing and studying the moon to a kind of terrible loneliness.

The tone of the story is very sombre and restrained and it tries to link scientific discourse with the emotional territory of grieving and the complexity of memory. It also implies that memory is a telescope, bent on the concentrated and dispassionate scrutiny of distant meanings. This is a section from the middle of the story:

Aeons ago, when Stella and I were children, we lived with our parents in the Western desert. Father worked for a mining company; mother, still complete and still carrying presence rather than absence, worked as a writer in the caravan which was our home. It was a simple austere life, governed by isolation.

How can I tell you about our desert? The spaces were so huge that we sometimes felt suspended, as though dangling from silk parachutes, between earth and sky. Wind blew up from the gulf, carrying the fragrance of sea water, and thin grasses quivered, and heat cracked open granite stones, and the umber earth shifted and stirred and rose in small restless spirals. Light was bent in the wind so that the look of things distorted: trees hung upside down and figures floated towards us in trembling dark verticals. Distance of any sort was impossible to calculate. We lived, that is to say, in

² John Berger [1984] 2005. *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos*. London: Bloomsbury.

³ Gail Jones. 1997. *Fetish Lives: Stories*. South Fremantle, (W. A.): Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

a field of abstraction. And there was, moreover, a strange sound in the air, like the after-echo of a bell, like the memory of a sound.

At night-time outer-space was altogether everywhere. Our caravan was a tiny bubble of kerosene-yellow illumination; but outside great patterns of white stars slid; in the cupola of heaven it was all immensity. The moon drifted upwards, a sovereign bright face. When it was full my father stood for hours beneath it, peering into his telescope. We resented him for his obsession and his self-enclosure. Mother grumbled and complained; her husband gave as peace-offerings delicate pencil drawings, curiously fluorescent, of the moon's visible surface. He kissed her on the forehead: it was his most typical gesture.

(In the desert moonlight that issued in rays through the windows we could see his narrow body undulating slowly above hers. A nebulous shape in a milky way).

The famous seas of the moon are not seas at all. They have never contained any water, but are lava-plains, once fluid, but now completely dry. Nevertheless these seas have remarkable names, names of antique and Latinate redolence. There is the Mare Imbrium (the Sea of Showers), the Oceanus Procellarum (the Ocean of Storms) and the Mare Serenitatus (the Sea of Serenity), to mention just three. The moon has drawn poetic impulses, just as it draws the heavy sad tides. It invites metaphors. It recruits metaphysics. It is a round-shaped screen, obligingly receptive, for any number of loony projections.

According to my father our desert was once an ocean. He would return from geological excursions with pockets-full of fossilised evidence. A complete ancient fish, a sea-star missing one limb, ammonites, pretty cockle shells, odds and ends prehistoric. Imagine, my father said, we are living beneath ghost waves. Imagine this place totally oceanic. We're like the Oceanus Procellarum, someone's imagined sea.

Leonardo da Vinci believed that moonshine was the reflected brightness of the oceans of the earth. So there were seas on the moon, in this fanciful manner of imagining, just as there were, in my own childhood, desert memories of waves.

Towards the end of the story, the focus returns to the father:

When in July 1969 Apollo 11 landed on the moon, depositing itself, flagrantly, in the Sea of Tranquility, my father was unexcited. He was already by then living permanently in the desert, away from television, away from cities, away from western community, and already imagining, through sand-drawings, alternative cosmologies. Nevertheless, for all his denunciations and disavowals, he mentioned the moon-landing often: it seemed his preoccupation. Among my father's belongings I found boxes of newspaper clippings: the one-small-step that was the one-giant-leap, Edwin Aldrin and Neil Armstrong planting an American flag, scientific instruments of impressive complexity, astronauts engaged in chubby-suited leaps and bounces. And in the note he left behind, there beside his body in the desert, he said we could locate his spirit through the telescope, moon-walking on the Sea of Tranquility. The moon, he wrote, was his own and particular totem.

When we write of nature we are both burdened and empowered by already existing versions. In the Western tradition, the moon is coded – since Aristotle – as corruptible, transient, deceptive, feminine, a symbol of potentially evil force in comparison to the supra-lunary world of pure, indestructible and unchanging space. In Eastern traditions the moon is often a symbol of constancy and eternity: the moon is the greatest of the yin powers in the Chinese cosmos, for example, and a manifestation of *qi*, or the breath of heaven. Moon-watching is associated with meditation, wisdom and the understanding of beauty. In Australian Aboriginal traditions the moon is masculine, and it symbolises a man who dies and is reborn again and again. In the Northern Territory story I'm familiar with, there is *literally* a man in the moon, and I wanted to take this idea as a sort of emblem for imagining relations between people across vast lonely spaces, and to try to speak of the estrangements that exist between families. There are as many cosmologies as there are people.

My work is concerned with metaphor, and with the idea that art is a kind of longing for completion. This story, "The Man in the Moon", includes the suggestion that in Australia there is an entirely other meaning to the world, that which is indigenous. When the father says that the moon is his own and particular totem, he is indicating how far he has moved from Western science: the totemic is a belief in sympathetic magic; it is an essentially spiritual and symbolic connection. The artist in indigenous cultures is the true magician: he or she serves as a medium for the sacred to be known through revelation. Here I am reminded of the words of Walter Benjamin, which I think have relevance for all nature-writing: "Truth is not the unveiling that destroys the secret, but the revelation that does it justice" (45)⁴.

(V) The Sacred and Death

Highly technological societies everywhere can learn from traditional cultures, and the uncanny other-side to secular Australia is Aboriginal meaning. Conceived as a 'dreaming', a mythic world perpetually in existence, in Aboriginal versions of the land all is sacred and inter-connected. The land is revered because it is of the same spirit as each individual and because it is irreplaceably precious. This is a system of belief built up over 60,000 years of continuous settlement.

Part of my adult life was spent by the Swan River in Perth – a river which lost its indigenous name in 1827, when the English sea captain James Stirling sailed the blue water, saw flocks of shiny black swans, and arrived at a little bay at the foot of a hill which is just down the road from where I lived. Stirling called the area Mount Eliza, but the Aboriginal name still exists: Goonininup. The region is now the site of an old brewery, but for the Nyoongar community, the local tribe, it is a resting place of Wagyl, a rainbow snake that moved through the whole area, creating with its body and movements the shape of the river, the hills, the springs and the bays. The site was the basis of a legal dispute; Aboriginal people demanded recognition of the sacredness of the area.

I mention this example because it deeply concerns me: one aspect of the gift is obligation; the obligation of respect and preservation. Where there are contending claims on land

⁴ Walter Benjamin [1955] 1999. *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt ed. London: Pimlico.

and meaning, it would seem fruitful to insist that many meanings are possible, and that in any case Western imperial meaning should not take automatic precedence. I think of art as a kind of proliferation of meanings, and these take place in contexts of moral community.

Here is an Aboriginal man speaking of his relationship to the world. The voice is of Bill Neidjie, of the Bunitji clan in the Northern Territory, and his oral narratives have been recorded under the title *Story about Feeling* (1989)⁵.

Well e tell you about this story,
 about story where you feel ... laying down.
 Tree, grass, star ...
 because star and tree working with you.
 We got blood pressure
 but same thing ... spirit on your body,
 but e working with you.
 Even nice wind blow ... having a sleep ...
 because that spirit e with you.
 Listen carefully this, you can hear me.
 I'm telling you because earth just like mother
 and father and brother to you.
 That tree same thing.
 Your body, my body I suppose,
 I'm same as you ... anyone.
 Tree working when you sleeping and dream.
 This story e can listen carefully, e can listen slow.
 If you in city well I suppose lot of houses,
 you can't hardly look this star
 but might be one night you look.
 Have a look star because that's the feeling.
 String, blood ... through your body.

Neidjie's cosmology makes no distinction between human life, which breathes, pumps blood, dreams, watches, and the life of the moon, the trees and the pulsating stars. *Have a look star, because that's the feeling*. This is not my tradition and I cannot appropriate it. Yet other knowledges instruct us in modesty and respect, and unlock and enrich our own cultural imaginaries. I find this fragment of story lyrical, moving and conceptually complex: it indicates an audaciously imagined world, and seems to confirm an intuition we all have at some stage, that the body is also the universe.

In 1999 I went for the first time to an observatory, in the hills outside Perth, to look closely at the heavens. It was a balmy clear night; there was a light wind and the scent of eucalyptus floating in streams in the air. Apart from the large observatory, there were three smaller telescopes set up outside in the bush, and I was led through complete darkness – gradually finding my night-vision – to where each rested, already focused on planets and

⁵ Bill Neidjie. 1989. *Story About Feeling*. Keith Taylor ed. Broome (W. A.): Magabala Books.

stars. In the darkness I climbed a ladder to look into a telescope turned to the moon. The magnification of detail was wholly astonishing: the moon's face met me with the dazzling unreality of hallucination. White, ghostly, exquisitely detailed: I saw no footprints, no human marks, but only the bright intensification of an already familiar face. I remember feeling very excited; my heart was pounding and I felt both energised and transfixed. Yet when my time was up I had to be helped in a slow decent down the ladder, because the after-effect of gazing at the moon in darkness is blindness. I was blind for two or three minutes after descending, and found this proximity of the visionary and loss of sight beautifully compelling.

This is the allegory of art and death at work. We treasure the vision, the gift, because it in some way contests the annihilation of life itself. The beaming moon, the changeable emblem, returned to its tiny size, but the moment of changed perspective and bizarre intimacy remained in the pounding heart, as though there was indeed a connection between single bodies and entire cosmologies, between private inner-space and distant outer-space. Transcendental radiance is no more the 'essence' of art than is the darkness that surrounds it, but the encounter of each together, so close and inter-implicated, seems to suggest something fundamental about why we bother to paint, or write, or compose a piece of music. I don't wish to end on a grand rhetorical point but on a small and simple one: the gift returned outweighs all our intuitions of nothingness. The smallest ephemeral artwork, the smallest figuration, is testimony to the act of remembering that all is not lost.

Author's Afterword

Five Meditations on a Moonlit Night is an 'old' piece of writing. It was written in the year 2000 as a talk to be delivered at the Toji Cultural Centre in South Korea on the very general topic of "Nature and Art". I'd been invited at the last minute by DFAT (the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) through ASIALINK (a cross-cultural agency based in Melbourne) – to speak in Korea. Someone had dropped out at the last minute and I had only a few days, while teaching, to prepare the talk. Among other things, I included a few extracts from one of my short stories, "The Man in the Moon". It suited my purpose because the story was written in an oddly scientific register, and because I was perhaps somewhat panicky at so urgent a task. I'd been asked to speak mainly about my own work, but felt reluctant to do so, so this paper was a compromise in many senses – its simplicity a symptom of nervousness about translation, its citation of other texts rather too obviously expedient.

I lost my copy of the paper and it was never published, but it arrived by email, out of the blue, in November 2016. When I read it I recovered some of my initial embarrassment – the sense that it was hasty, thin, unworthy except as a friendly talk – and also that the short story it quoted from seems nowadays heavy-handed and problematic. It is reproduced here without changes, except to reference that I no longer live in Perth. But I was also powerfully reminded of how central Veronica Brady's teaching and friendship were to this talk, and indeed to the trajectories of my own intellectual life. We had often spoken together of the concept of gift economies; we had exchanged books and articles on the topic, and enjoyed vigorous arguments (the nun and the atheist) about the meanings of the universe, about what is given and gifted, about what remains lacking or occluded. She had always liked

“The Man in The Moon”, and one night we shared a meal in which, rather inebriated, she began by citing it. We joked about astronauts and explorations. We waxed and waned on the night sky. We concurred happily in our wish to remain solidly earthbound. The evening ended with our toasting Bill Neidjie and his radical-materialist model of the sacred. So this casual piece of writing, still carrying my ambivalence and the fraught time of its composition, is also replete with Veronica’s energetic presence, with her influence, spirit and loving goodwill. I now dedicate it to her memory.

Gail Jones is the author of two short-story collections and six novels, the most recent of which is *A Guide to Berlin* (2015). Her fiction has been translated into sixteen languages, won awards in Australia, and been short-listed for international awards. She has been the recipient of writing fellowships in India, Ireland, Germany, France, the USA, China and Italy. She is currently Professor of Writing in the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney.

gail.jones@westernsydney.edu.au